An Overview Of The Mind Sports Olympiad

By VennerRoad, 10th Sep 2014

An overview of the Mind Sports Olympiad from the first event in 1997 to date.

Etan with Medeleine Heppell in 2014

The first Mind Sports Olympiad was held at the Royal Festival Hall between August 18 and August 22, 1997. The brainchild of chess author and artificial intelligence *aficionado* David Levy, it showed great promise for the first four years. The second event was held at the Novotel Hotel, Hammersmith; the third was held at Kensington, Olympia; and the fourth at Alexandra Palace, North London. These were all truly massive events; at Alexandra Palace, a big hall was devoted solely to the *Times* crossword competition.

The fifth event was very much smaller; held at South Bank University in the summer of 2001, it would be the last one to be held in the capital until 2006; 2002 saw a move to the campus of Loughborough University; then three years at another campus, this time in Manchester, at what was then thought to be its permanent home. In 2006 however, it moved back to the capital where it was held at Westminster University, then can the all-time low, a church hall in Potters Bar. The following year, 2008, saw its return, and this year, 2014, it was held at a new North London venue where not only was there a fine turnout out but sponsorship by Winton Capital Management, Mitsubishi Electric UK and DeepMind Technologies which saw substantial prizes for especially the Pentamind.

There is a reason for the decline of MSO; this need not concern us now, but David Levy's (uncontested) explanation can be found here.

The Mind Sports Olympiad is run by a small but dedicated team drawn mainly from the chess world. Chess organiser and tournament controller Tony Corfe is Levy's right hand man. He is on occasion assisted by his wife Barbara, and in earlier years by their son and daughter. Later years have seen Etan Ilfeld formerly of Los Angeles; gamester Andrew Havery; and cribbage player Josef Kollar taking an active part in organising the event. But for this dedication, there would be no MSO.

This year there was not much in the way of chess; earlier events were if not dominated by the royal game then certainly heavily chess-oriented. In 2001, the big event was the Commonwealth Championship which was combined with the Ron Banwell Masters. This saw a large contingent of Indian players, one of whom won the gold.

Although never the biggest event, the most prestigious is and always has been the Pentamind. As its title suggests, this involves five disciplines, in practice the five best scores from five of the many games on offer, subject to they're being no confliction in the timetabling. As many gamesters play in two or several events (there is now a special ticket for this), this widens the field. The name Hassabis has appeared on the Pentamind trophy no fewer than five times. As a junior, Demis Hassabis was once the highest ranked chess player in the world for his age. He won the Pentamind from 1998 to 2001 and again in 2003. Demis has a brother, George, who is no stranger to the Mind Sports.

In 2006, another Hassabis appeared at MSO; at that time, Alexander Hassabis was a babe in arms, but last year aged seven he became the youngest ever gold medal winner, a junior gold in the Settlers Of Catan event. This year he was joined by his younger brother Arthur aged only five who took silver in the same event, Alexander having to settle for bronze.

Proud Dad Demis is also well known in the computing field, designing video games and working in artificial intelligence, the latter which is also shared by MSO supremo David Levy.

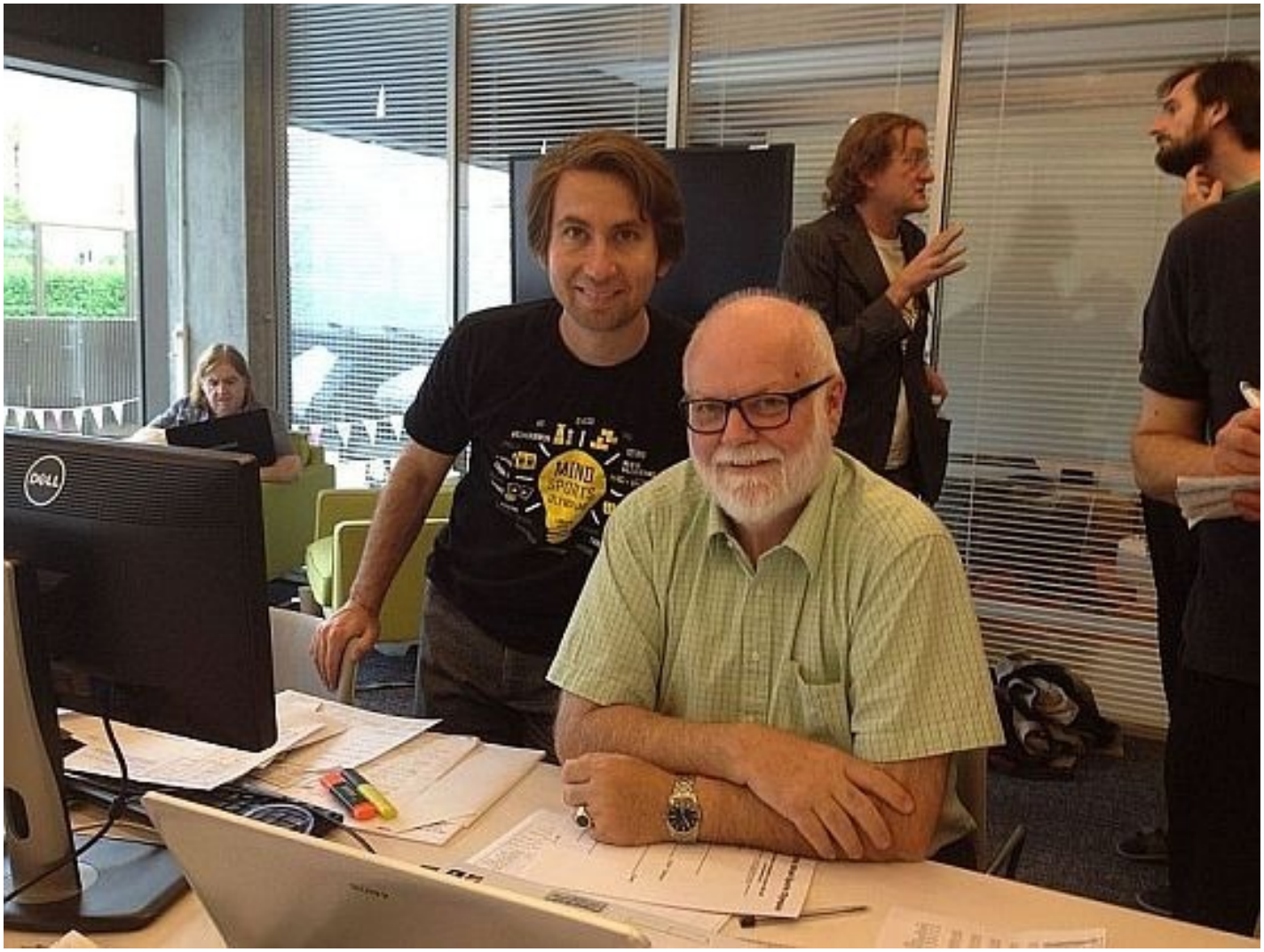
Three other names have also appeared on the Pentamind trophy more than once: multi-gamer David Pearce; professional gamester Dario De Toffoli of Italy; and new kid on the block Andres Kuusk of Estonia who won the title in 2011, shared it last year with chess player Ankush Khandelwal, and won it again this year, outright.

Although male competitors far outnumber female, the latter do exist; special mention should go to Madeleine Heppell. The mother of chess playing twins, she won the bronze in the Ladies Pentamind this year, and the silver last year.

Full details of all the games and some background can be found on the two MSO websites including Boardability. These games include backgammon and poker. Because of gaming legislation, cash prizes are not permitted for either of these on unlicenced premises, but that does not deter the backgammon fraternity. Dario is a very strong backgammon

player; other world class players have also put in an appearance from time to time including John Clark. Poker is a different kettle of fish, and the World Amateur Championship is a title that cuts no ice outside of the MSO. New and off-beat games have also been featured regularly at MSO including Kings Cribbage and Lines Of Action. One game that sounds a bit of a joke is diving chess (or chess diving). The brainchild of Etan, this was introduced only in 2011, and surprisingly it is still here. As might be expected, it is not held at the regular venue.

MSO has a presence on both Facebook and YouTube, so be sure to check it out. And if you are in the London area next summer...



Tony Corfe with Etan Ilfeld at the 2014 event

Tony Corfe is responsible for the day to day running of the Mind Sports; standing looking over him is Etan. In the background seated is Marc Shaw, one of the men who runs chess tournaments in the South East; standing is George Lane the mental calculations wizard, and talking to him (with the beard) is Alain Dekker the 2004 Pentamind Champion.

The 2013 Pentamind winners

Ankush Khandelwal is one of the strongest chess players in the country and a veteran MSO player in spite his youth. Last year, he and new boy Andres Kuusk of Estonia were joint Pentamind champions, the only time so far the title has been split. This year Andres went one better and won it outright.

One of the poker tournaments from the fourth MSO

A blast from the past; one of the poker tournaments from the 2000 event at Alexandra Palace. With his back to the camera is Harold Lee. Next to him at the table is Tony Niccoli, who was in the medals this year too. Standing in the green jacket and shirt with the green jumper tied in front of him is the author, and behind him also in green is chess player Gary Lee who won the overall poker title in 1998 and 1999.

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